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DIVIDE AND RULE



Jammu and Kashmir's diversity is held up as evidence of the intractable nature of political divides in the state. But is this just a colonial tactic to deny a much-needed political solution, asks Mona Bhan.

What are the stakes for Kashmir's border communities in the ongoing struggle for *azadi* from India? Those who question Kashmir's right to self-determination invariably fall back on its diverse ethnic and religious minorities to reject Kashmiri aspirations for *azadi*. The standard iteration of this narrative is that Kashmir cannot be reduced to the Valley, nor can diverse populations, which include Dards, Purigis, Baltis, Botos, and Brogpas among others, be expected to conform to the Kashmiri Muslim desire for freedom from Indian rule.

A slightly different version of the same narrative hones in on the "self" in self-determination, stressing the self as fragmented and heterogeneous, and therefore also politically divided. Such dominant narratives, however, almost never represent border communities as political subjects in their own right. Instead, their "difference" from Kashmiris, particularly from Kashmiri Muslims, is used to frame the Kashmiri struggle for self-determination as parochial and territorially limited in order to render it morally and politically illegitimate.

We can ask whether this standard narrative is truly invested in acknowledging the everyday struggles of border communities, whose lives have become deeply entwined with the logic and operations of a military state. To what extent is this narrative meant to detract from the foundational question of Kashmir's disputed political status in order to reinforce the justness and legitimacy of India's rule over Kashmir? Why is it that instead of genuinely engaging with the political aspirations and differences of border communities, the "otherness" is repeatedly used to shore up public apathy against Kashmir's right to self-determination? And, when and how did plurality in Kashmir become a justification for India's continued hold over an occupied territory?

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Those who speak on behalf of these communities and tout their “difference” as a justification for the political status quo seem to care little about what it means to live on the border, on the state’s margins, to be asked to offer their lives, land, and resources to maintain India’s security and territoriality. The most visible institutional and symbolic expression of the Indian state along the LoC is the Indian military, not its democracy, nor its sprawling shopping malls and arcades, nor its educational and healthcare institutions. In these spaces humans, horses, and cattle, cannot move freely: at the slightest pretext of a cross-border threat, people are expected to clear their fields for guns, ammunition, and landmines.

These are spaces where villagers are repeatedly displaced by wars or cross-border shelling and where civilian deaths and injuries count as collateral damage. These are also spaces where nostalgia for the past runs deep and imaginaries of a borderless world offer the hope of an alternative future for young men and women, one in which they are not just military recruits or porters, quite literally ferrying the burden of the state on their shoulders. In these spaces, conventional narratives of nation and nationalism are fiercely challenged on a daily basis, through music, poetry, and the persistent desire to connect with distant friends and relatives from across the border.

The invocation of “difference” is, however, hardly ever accompanied with the sincere desire to engage with the complex political identities of border communities, the contexts in which they were produced and the ways in which these are expressed and often stifled. Clearly, ethnic/religious/linguistic communities in Kashmir are far from homogeneous. For instance, Ladakh has a mix of Buddhist and Shi’a Muslims while Kashmir is predominantly Sunni Muslim. People in Kashmir speak Koshur while those in Ladakh either speak Purig, Balti, Ladakhi, or Shina, or a combination of all four.

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But while such plurality is supposedly a sign of India’s democratic vitality, in Kashmir it becomes a curse, used often to pit one difference against another; to pitch certain political aspirations as genuine and to label others as invalid, even seditious; and to reduce people’s sentiments and actions as either pro-Indian or pro-Pakistani.

The politics of identity in Kashmir, much like elsewhere, is deeply imbricated with the everyday operations of statecraft. Such operations take on more urgency in occupied zones as governments create new or intensify existing divisions to build their legitimacy, one identity at a time. The foregrounding of difference suggests a state that has perfected the art of governance through fragmentations, using old colonial methods for new political designs, whereby linguistic, regional, and religious/sectarian differences translate into “divisions” or “fault lines,” making the Kashmir dispute an “intractable” one. Therefore in Kashmir today, it should come as no surprise that we have division between the Mallas and the Hanji, discord between Kashmiri and Gujjar, a divide between the *gam* (village) and the *shahar* (city), in addition to the longstanding battle between Pandits and Muslims, which has of course sparked much national interest, given its easy alignments with the explicitly Hindu and Brahminical orientation of Indian politics.

The thousand selves that have emerged within the context of years of representational and identity politics in Kashmir did not even organically on their own but were crafted or intensified by the state and its agents to achieve multiple political ends. From creating voting blocs to transforming linguistic/religious/regional divisions into insurmountable political barriers, the state has used development, patronage, and elections to divide populations and shift attention from Kashmir’s long-term political settlement to the mechanics of state formation. Once people are reduced to their representational identities, they become easily manoeuvrable, providing statistics for the state to tally everything from population to health indices to the levels and extent of patriotism and national loyalty.

In the border province of Gurez last year, the PDP and NC both attracted voters through a mix of theatrics and “election goodies,” which included supplying them with snow boots, cellphones, and money. In Kargil, several years ago, gifting a fat hen and distribut

it among those who could mobilise voters served a similar purpose. Such was the intensity of the PDP-NC animosity in Gurez 2015 that political adversaries refused to attend the same mosque or pray together.

In this case, we see the “self” fractured along party lines, and yoked more broadly to the banal workings of “Indian democracy.” Compared to these party affiliations, which seem fleeting and eventually reconcilable, other identities to us (the regional, religious variety) appear more ahistoric and primordial. I do not wish to discount people’s political agency, their religious or regional affinity and aspirations, or their cultural and linguistic differences. And yet there is an urgent need to foreground how the politics of the “self” has been mobilised by the state to defer Kashmir’s political settlement either by actively encouraging political/regional divisions or by pitting one identity or political aspiration against another.

For instance, the demand of a Union Territory in Leh is strategically deployed at critical moments to inflame regional and religious divisions between Ladakh and Kashmir. Kargilis, who are mostly Shi’a Muslim, reject the UT demand in favor of Greater Ladakh so they can revitalize their broken ties with Baltistan. Other, smaller minorities in Ladakh, such as Brogpas, foreground their unique “racial” status as Aryans to differentiate themselves from other Ladakhis. In recent years, the RSS has politicised this difference to portray these minorities as authentically Hindu, so it can claim and Hinduise Kashmir’s borders.

“ If we shift attention to the larger political and historic issue of Kashmir’s unresolved status that has shaped the lives of Ladakhis, Kargilis, Gujjars, Brogpas, and Kashmiris alike, we see them not as fragments but as allies in their common struggle against the deferment of the Kashmir crisis ”

I see these political identities as the outcome of the same state apparatus that has continually stalled Kashmir’s political settlement in the name of India’s national interest. In the flurry of debates on Kashmir in which Ladakh, Kashmir, and Jammu are seen as politically divided entities, there is a conveniently brushed aside foundational truth. Jammu and Kashmir is a disputed territory and has been since 1947. The relentless focus on J&K’s fragmented politics by progressives and conservatives alike is oriented to deferring its political resolution, to hold on to Kashmir a wee bit longer.

J&K’s unresolved status is the reason why everyone in the state has suffered, whether it is because of a brutal military occupation because of the LoC that violently splits people and communities, or because of collaborative governments that purposefully play divide and rule. If we shift attention to the larger political and historic issue of Kashmir’s unresolved status that has shaped the lives of Ladakhis, Kargilis, Gujjars, Brogpas, and Kashmiris alike, we see them not as fragments but as allies in their common struggle against the deferment of the Kashmir crisis—a crisis that can only be resolved in accordance with people’s aspirations.

Such an alignment would make visible the mechanics of how to best devise inclusive models of a plebiscite. But without the political commitment and honesty required to accept Kashmir’s temporary accession to India, all we hear are the laments of the progressive left-liberals, as well as the ultra-conservatives alike, over fractured Kashmiri identities. Those who supposedly represent the interests of Kashmir’s marginalised groups should indeed be at the forefront of demanding Kashmir’s political resolution, unless, of course, their intention is to prop up the bogey of difference to stifle challenges to the hegemonic idea of Indian nationhood, in which Kashmir will always remain a prized territory and an integral part of India. The political status quo and violent borders do little to create genuine spaces for dialogue and dissent for those whose difference is deployed to undermine Kashmir’s disputed political status.



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